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Right: As a child, Simms attended the Indiana School for the Deaf.

The Power of Expectations: Two Stories

By Laurene E. Simms

I remember very well as a girl in school feeling the condescension of my elders. I was poor, black, and deaf, and I could tell the teachers' feelings and their beliefs about me from their facial expressions. They would hand me worksheets. I knew it was busy work, but I did it anyway. I was seen as having a low IQ and even being mentally retarded. I could see—and feel—their expressions of pity.

A part of me must have believed those teachers were right, and I might still believe they were right if not for the impact of a single teacher in seventh grade. He was Jesse Smith, a white, deaf man who taught math at the Indiana School for the Deaf. Mr. Smith said to me one word that made all the difference and changed my life. I can't remember the first time he used the word, but I remember how that word reverberated through my soul. That word was "CAN." I saw that word and woke up. Until that moment, I had been written off. Then Mr. Smith challenged me with his high expectations and firm belief in my potential. "You can!" he told me, and I was transformed. After seventh grade, holding firm to a growing belief in my own ability, I began to earn good grades. I studied as hard as I could and did the best I could in every class. I would graduate as valedictorian.

However, there was a chemistry class and its teacher—and from these, thanks to my father, I would learn something, too. Even as I look back, I find that teacher was simply, forthrightly, and manifestly lousy. He was not interested in teaching us. He had us memorize the names of the elements, never bothering to tell us what any of the elements were or what they did. Of course we figured out that oxygen was the element that we breathed in the air, and that two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom equaled a molecule of water. However, that was only accidentally because of him. He rarely answered our questions, and when he did, we couldn't figure out what he said. Equally inexcusable, he dressed sloppily in soiled clothing—and he had rotten breath. The man should not have been in a classroom. Still there he was, and despite

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my efforts, I got a C in his class. I had done the best I could, but there it was among my A's and B's.

My father always insisted upon good grades. Good grades meant success, success meant survival, and perhaps a ticket out of the cycle of poverty. Education was of supreme importance, and he had to be strict. We all had to work very hard. The last of seven children and the only deaf child in the family, I understood. I knew my father would be upset when he saw that C. My father was very tall, around 6-and-a-half feet. I was 5 feet 2, a very short high school kid who trembled in his shadow. I had fallen short of his expectations, and I was terrified. Before I approached him, I wrote out an explanation for that C. I argued that the teacher's style of teaching was vague, and that his indifference made the material difficult to absorb. I had tried hard, I wrote, but inadequate teaching had resulted in my less-than-stellar performance. My father took the note, looked it over, and then set it aside. Even though I

believed I posed some good points, the quality of the teacher's performance didn't seem to matter to him in the least.

My father, like so many of his generation, had been instructed not to use sign language, but we had some home gestures and I could read his lips and read his face. I understood what he said next just fine. There will always be bad teachers, just as there will always be good teachers. There will always be bad police officers and good police officers. There will always be lousy doctors and good doctors, and so on. This would be the case for my entire life, my father said, so what happened was up to me. I had to make the decision to double my efforts in the face of someone else's inadequacy. "It's up to you," he told me. In my father's eyes, it didn't matter if my teacher was good or not, just as it didn't matter whether I was deaf or not, a female or not; it was my job to study, read, and write, always to the full extent of my ability, regardless of whether

or not I had a good teacher.

My father taught me that there will always be those who look down on us and oppress us, and there will always be those whose incompetency and indifference make our lives more difficult. Regardless, it is up to us to decide to overcome those obstacles and fight for our success. I had to decide to read and study hard; I had to make the decision to refuse to allow a lousy teacher to control my grade. I had to control my destiny. I had to determine my future.

Today, I am grateful for the faith and strictness of my father and for that first teacher who looked at me and said, "You can!" In their different ways, those two men enabled me to fulfill my potential and stand up to those who had so misclassified me. Thanks to them, because of the high expectations of a father and a teacher, I worked as hard as I could to learn and grow into the person I am today. Thanks to them, I knew I could be successful. I am forever indebted.